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Instructions for the Seven-day Meditation Retreat

Morning and Noon Talks by Master Sheng-yen
December 26 to December 31, 1992

Translated by L. C. Cleary

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THE FIRST DAY

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Concepts and Methods of Ch'an Practice

There are two essential points in cultivation: the concept and the method. If you can grasp them clearly, then you are sure to derive power from practice. So please follow the master's instructions. I'll explain the proper approach to the concepts and method of practice.

First, I'll explain the concept of cultivation. There are three essential principles: to put aside your self, to put aside your goal, and to put aside the past and the future. The self means your body and mind. The goal means the benefits of Ch'an practice. The past and future mean looking back and projecting forward in thought. These three items comprise the central core of the self, and the essential elements of self value, and it is precisely these three that are the root of misfortune, bringing along as they do affliction and bondage. If you do not put these aside, there will be no way for you to get the most important result of Ch'an practice, the experience of enlightenment. You must put them aside at least temporarily, in order to be able to experience the benefits of Ch'an.

Next, I'll explain the two essential principles for all methods of cultivating practice.

The first essential principle is to have your "center" low — the "center" of the body must be below the waist. If you make your head the center, you may experience pains in the head and the gut, as well as hot flashes. If you take your chest as the center, it may feel constricted and the stomach feel stuffed. If you put the feeling of weight where your buttocks meet the cushion, then you will not have any side effects.

The second essential principle is to relax your body and mind. First practice relaxing the muscles of your body and relaxing your nerves.

Then relax your mind and calm your emotions. Relaxing your body means making every cell in your body feel light and loose. It means to let go of the tension in every part of you — your face, eyes, shoulders, arms, hands, belly, legs and feet. Relaxing the mind and calming the emotions mean not having any worries, not feeling rushed, not being annoyed and confused, not being fearful, not being apprehensive or frightened. If you can put aside all uneasy emotions and concentrate fully on the method of Ch'an practice, then you will relax. First, try letting your muscles relax, and you will grow less nervous and your mind will calm. The most important thing is to relax your mid-section. If you don't do this, then when you are engaged in sitting meditation, you may feel tightness in your chest, swelling in your belly, dizziness in your head, or blockage of your vital energy, and there will be no way for you to persist in your meditation.

Essential Principles of Cultivating Practice

There are two essential principles for cultivating practice: In attitude, you offer yourself, and in method, you correct yourself. The attitude and the method must be used together.

Offering yourself means to dedicate your body and mind to the life of practice. If you practice with the attitude of offering yourself, then you will not be self-centered. If you practice with a self-centered attitude, not only are you likely to harm other people, but you will also experience much affliction. If you practice with a self-centered attitude, no matter how you search, the only possible result is affliction. The only way to remove affliction is to cast off your self-centeredness.

Correcting yourself means using the methods of Ch'an practice to carry out an overall process of regulating and rectifying the conduct of body, mouth, and mind. Ordinarily, you should use the five basic precepts and the eight-fold path to correct your physical, mental, and verbal conduct. During

a seven-day retreat, we use sitting meditation, walking meditation, prostrations, and work in order to help us to be mindful of our actions. We curtail our speech and chant scriptures to regulate what we say. We use methods of counting breaths, reciting Buddha's name, and investigating hua-t'ou's to correct our mental activities.

Of these three forms of behavior, mental activities are the most subtle, and also the hardest to correct. To correct them, first we use correct knowledge, correct thought, correct concentration, and correct diligence. Day after day, you must regularly conduct self-observation. Be clear from moment to moment, aware of thoughts arising and disappearing, aware of their correctness. Be aware of everything. If a thought arises carelessly, once it disappears, you must ask yourself: what was I just thinking? If you persevere in this manner, then you will always maintain correct mindfulness.

There are many ways to guard the mind. During every moment of the day, observe: Wherever the body is, there should your mind be. Whatever the task, keep your mind at one with it. Whatever you say, keep your mind clear. When the activities of body, speech and mind are united, you will have grasped the essentials of Ch'an practice.

Group Practice

The style of Ch'an practice can be divided into individual practice and group practice.

The advantage of individual practice is that it is unrestricted: you can adjust it to your mental and physical condition according to circumstance. But for those who lack self-discipline and control, the practice is often uneven and unfulfilling.

Group practice can be divided into two categories: Practice with a master or practice without a master. Both these categories require guidelines.

The master has three functions:

- 1) Based on the correct knowledge of Buddha-dharma and the experience of Ch'an practice, he gives appropriate instructions and corrections to practitioners.
- 2) Deals with problems of the group and works with them to resolve difficulties.
- 3) Explains the concepts and methods of Ch'an practice to the group as a whole.

Often when people practice Ch'an, they may be aware that they have problems, but often they do not recognize them for what they are, and therefore, they need the master's instructions to bring their problems to light and correct them. This is the purpose of the master's instructions during the seven-day retreat.

The physical and mental condition of each practitioner varies. Thus, the master's instruction cannot always be the same. If they were always the same, they might be of some help to a few, but this kind of instruction is like listening to a tape recording, or reading a book or an article. It will never be responsive enough. There will be no way to prescribe the right Dharma medicine for each individual.

THE SECOND DAY

The Center of the Body

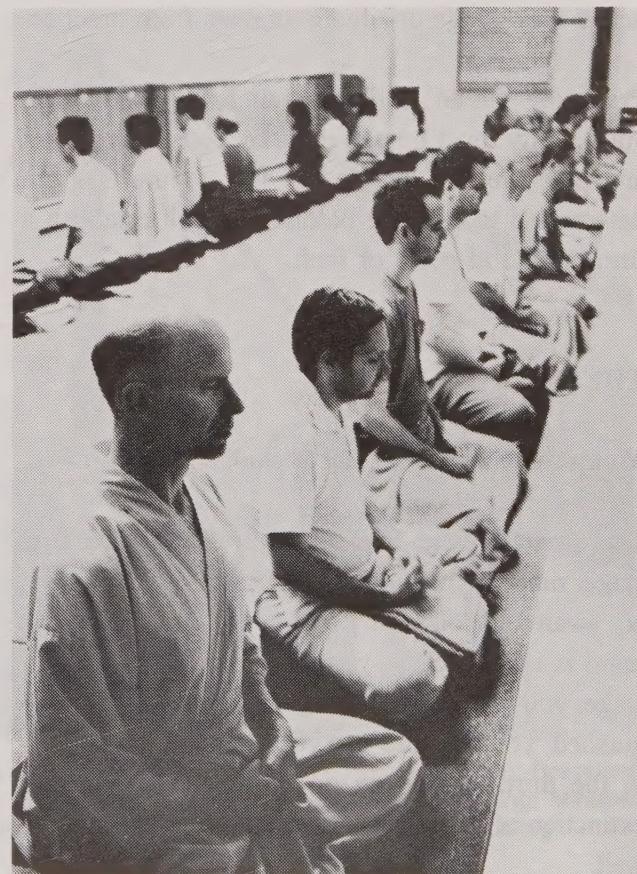
When you stand, put the right palm over the left, and place both hands over the belly, at the *dan-tian* (field of elixir). This will enable the mind to concentrate and settle down. The center of the body will follow the position of the hands and settle on the *dan-tian*. Adopt this position not only when you are in the Buddha-shrine or the Ch'an hall, but

whenever you listen to someone talk or are in conversation. Then your mind will not scatter and your vital energy will not dissipate.

Do not center in your head. Rather, there are three centers that are appropriate. When standing, center in the mid-section or on the soles of the feet. When you are practicing sitting meditation, if you feel scattered, center where your buttocks meet the cushion. If you feel pressure in your head or blockage in your chest, center on the *yung ch'uan hsueh* (flowing spring point), located on the soles of your feet. Make sure you relax the muscles where you center.

Faith in Ch'an Practice

For people who have practiced Ch'an for many years, there can be no question of the mind of faith, because without it they would not have persevered.



But those who have recently begun to practice, or those who are participating in a retreat for the first time might find that they lack faith in the Buddhadharma, in themselves, or in the master.

Ch'an practitioners must have faith in the concepts and methods of Buddhadharma. You must have faith that they are correct and reliable and that everyone can use them. You must have faith in the ability of the master and in his experience.

If you practice according to the principles and methods explained to you, then you will attain the benefits of Ch'an practice.

There are four levels of faith. First, deluded faith — blind worship without reason. Second, admiring faith — when you believe a teaching is useful but still consider it lofty and out of reach. Third, faith based on understanding — when reason and logic lead to acceptance. Fourth, faith acquired from actual knowledge or benefit attained from practice.

Practicing Ch'an is like learning any other skill: your ability must be perfected by constant refining and polishing. If you do not fear failure and are determined to advance boldly, you will establish a firm and solid mind of faith.

THE THIRD DAY

Moment to Moment Birth and Extinction

There are three stages of Ch'an practice. In the first stage, random thoughts are numerous, and there is no awareness of their birth and extinction. Your mind is really not on your method. At the second stage, you know when thoughts are born and extinguished, you begin to use your method effectively. In the third stage, you do not see the birth and extinction of thoughts — you are using the method well.

When you practice, you seek the third stage, but the task is difficult. When thoughts arise, don't hate them, just return to the method. "Moment to moment birth and extinction" means that thoughts perish as soon as they arise. There is no need to care about such thoughts. Of most importance is to begin again.

Beginning again means that every time you are aware of thoughts, you return to the method. This is an opportunity to begin again because at this point, a thought has already passed and the next thought has not yet arisen. Therefore, each moment is a beginning. This is like a mountain climber who is climbing along a dangerous cliff. He must not look ahead or behind, else he will lose his footing. If he does fall, he must grab his support rope and pull himself back to the point from which he fell. Every step must be held fast, every step is a beginning.

As each thought arises and disappears, this is movement forward, and each beginning is a stage in the process of completion. In the beginning of your practice, your thoughts will often depart from the method. When you begin to use the method well, you will become aware of thoughts arising and disappearing. The first thought is with the method, and so are the second, the third, the thousandth. If you sustain this concentration without a break, this is called "well-meshed practice." If you get to the point where there are no thoughts, save the method, and then you reach the point where even the method disappears, then you reach the stage where "the meditation work is fused through."

Impermanence Means Renewal

Impermanence means that all worldly phenomena are in a continuous process of birth and destruction, arising and disappearing. If you can understand that all phenomena are impermanent, then your faith

will be ensured, and you will be full of hope. You will be thankful for things that are good and optimistic about things that are not good. This is why Ch'an master Yunmen said, "Every day is a good day." There is no time without hope, and no effort doomed to eternal failure. Naturally, every day is a good day after all.

Not only is every day a good day, but every thought is a good thought. This does not mean that every thought is pure and clean; quite a few may be bad. All you must do is recognize that a thought is arising and immediately return to your method, and you

make a fresh start. Every time you discover a thought, you will immediately have a new beginning. You will feel happy; your body and mind will be light and relaxed, and you will feel that time is passing quickly. This attitude will influence our everyday life. Bad situations will not immediately provoke vexation, and you will be confident about your future. You will see your future as very hopeful.

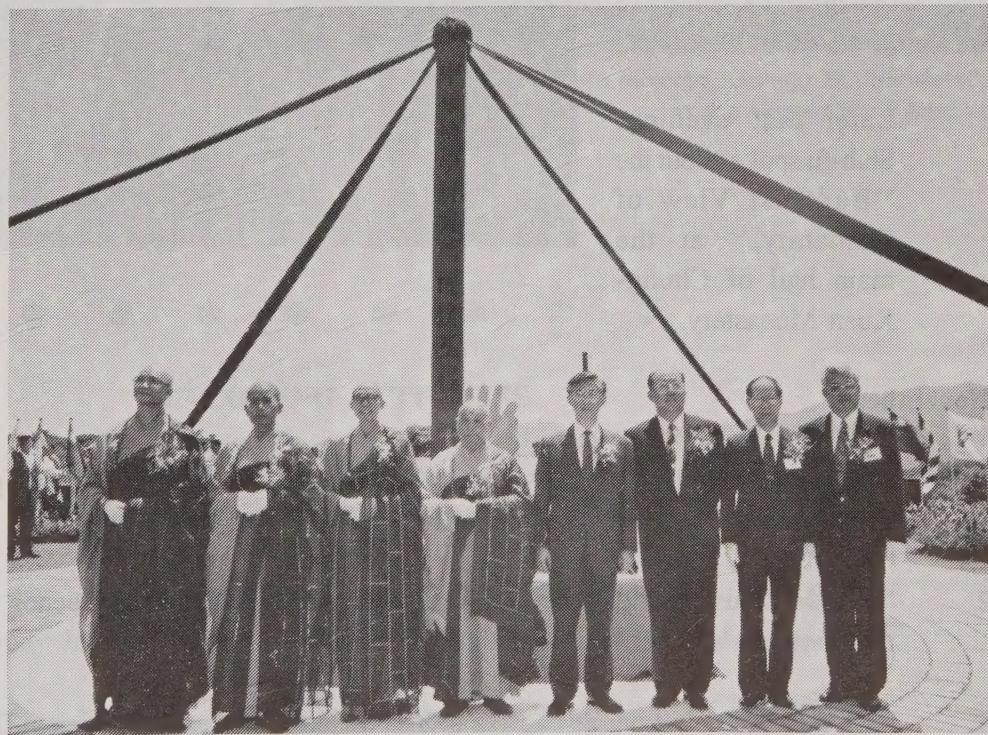
If you understand impermanence properly, then you will live in a joyful state of moment-to-moment renewal, constant peace, and unflagging progress in your practice.

NEWS FROM TAIWAN

On August 30th Master Sheng-yen conducted the ground-breaking ceremony of Dharma Drum Mountain. He expressed the goal of the Dharma Drum Mountain: To rely on Ch'an wisdom to promote Buddhist teachings to all people and to foster a strong sense of compassion towards all sentient beings.

Over 3,000 people were present at this ceremony; among them were many Dharma Masters and government officials.

Here is a partial list of buildings slated for construction: the Buddha Hall, Ch'an Hall, solitary retreat cells, lecture hall, cafeteria, reception hall, the Buddhist Institute, the library and international conference auditorium, accommodations for monks, nuns and laity. Completion is scheduled for sometime in 1996.



From left: Dharma Masters Ching Neng, Hong Yin, Sheng-yen, Wu Ming; President of Control Yuan, Mr. Chen Lu-an; Minister of Interior, Mr. Wu Po-hsiung; Minister of Education, Mr. Ko Wei-fan; Magistrate of Taipei County, Mr. Yo Ch'ing.

NEWS ITEMS

October

29 At the invitation of Dharma Master Pu Hsien and Mr. Sheng-kai Chang, Shih-fu conducted the opening ceremony of the Chung-Kuan Monastery, the first large Buddhist monastery in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

28 "Ch'an Wisdom — Knowing and Doing" Delivered at a meeting sponsored by the School of Oriental Studies at the University of Sao Paulo and by the Chung-Kuan Monastery.

30 Guo-chou Shi, Shih-fu's assistant monk, conducted a Beginner's Meditation class for a group of 80 Brazilians.

Opening Ceremony Talk at the Chung-Kuan Monastery



Later that evening, Shih-fu spoke about the "Buddhist View of Humanity," at the main hall of Chung-Kuan Monastery.

November

1 "Ch'an in Daily Life." Talk given at the Oeste Parana Club in Foz Do Iguacu, Paraguay. Shih-fu was invited by Sheng-kai Chang.

2 "The Buddhist World View." — the Chung-Kuan Temple in Buenos Aires, Argentina — at the invitation of Dharma Master Hung-che.

3 "Ch'an and Daily Living." Spoke at The School of Oriental Studies in Del Salvador University — at the invitation of Dr. Luisa Rosell, Chairperson and translator.

Later Shih-fu lectured on "Practice and Study in Buddhist Scriptures."

8 Arrived in Tucson, Arizona.

9 "A Guide through Tien-T'ai Meditation" delivered at the University of Arizona at the invitation of Prof. Robert Gimello.

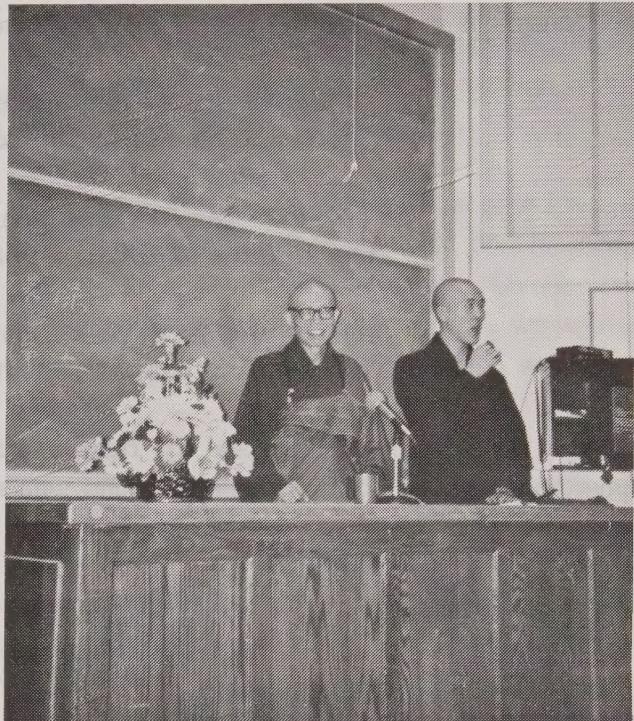
In the evening Shih-fu delivered a lecture on "Buddhist Solutions to the Problem of Living a Spiritual Life in the Modern World" to a general audience at the university.

13 "A Ch'an Look at the Physical and Psychological World." At New York University at the invitation of the Chinese Student Association.

15 "Why Practice Buddhism? Especially Now" — at the invitation of Prof. McRae and the Buddhist Studies Group at Cornell University.

16 "Practice Based on the Lotus Sutra." Presented to the students of Profs. McRae and Tiyavanich.

17 "Zen Wisdom . . . Knowing and Doing" at Temple University for Prof. John Rains, Chairman of Dept. of Religion.



Shih-fu lectured, Guo-gu Shi translated,
at the University of Arizona



UP-COMING ACTIVITIES

One-day Sitting Meditation

Saturday, January 8, 8:30 A.M. to 8:30 P.M.

One-day Recitation of Buddha's Name

Saturday January 15 and February 12, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.

One-day Beginner's Meditation Class

Saturday January 22 and February 26, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.

Three-day Meditation Retreat

February 19, 9:00 A.M. to February 21, 5:00 P.M.

Ch'an Meditation Center *presents* Three Week-end Seminars

An in-depth look at the practice, historical development, and the monastic institutions of Ch'an reveals the inaccuracy of prevailing Western attitudes. Ch'an is neither anti-intellectual, iconoclastic, nor mystically unrelated to the everyday world. This series of lectures is designed to dispel commonly held misconceptions in order to lead us to an understanding of living Ch'an.

May 13 and 14, 1994 with Professor John R. McRae
The Formation of Ch'an in China

May 20 and 21, 1994 with Professor T. Griffith Foulk
The History of Ch'an Monasticism and Its Practices

June 10 and 11, 1994 with Professor Robert E. Buswell, Jr.
Monastic Practice in the Korean Zen Tradition

Explore the spiritual tradition and the rich cultural framework that is central to Ch'an. This is an opportunity to learn about Ch'an history and witness Ch'an as it is practiced in our own time.

Please call or write us for more information.

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